

## FRED MARTIN: ART AND HISTORY — DINNER AT VAN'S

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I took my wife to the doctor's. When I walked into the waiting room there was a copy of *Art in America*, February '82, lying on the chair where I was about to sit. It must have been meant for me, because never before have I found anything in that room but the *New Yorker*, *Time* and comic books for kids. My wait was long enough to read every letter, ad and article in the first half of the magazine, all the way to Donald Kuspit's piece about neoexpressionism in Germany. Kuspit's article was a brain buster intended to prove that neoexpressionism (and New Image in New York) was different from old expressionism, as practiced everywhere by people who have been driven to it by the simple force of personal circumstances in every year since at least 1900. Kuspit insisted on the difference, but I could not understand his argument and could not see other than superficial differences when I looked at the illustrations.

As I drove home from the doctor's office, I realized that all that I could learn from the pictures in Kuspit's article—as well as from other, similar pictures I have seen in other articles during this last year—was that an art like this, which has been forbidden existence for the last twenty to thirty years, is now to be praised, and so we who teach must now stop trying to beat the s--t out of students who want only to express themselves. In fact, we must now begin to beat them into being “ba-ad” like most of them instinctively always were. I thought also of my own career as an artist, and how “ba-ad” (everyone said so) all my early things were—bad in every over-expressive, overly personal and unprofessional way imaginable; and I thought how in the middle sixties a friend had finally led, cajoled, persuaded, co-opted me into “professionalism” (her term) and how that professionalism hadn't really helped my career that much, either; and then I began to think about how, now “ba-ad” is in. And then I began to have a very powerfully growing opinion that I had wasted an important twenty years of my life.

When I got home, there was a message that Van had called to invite me to dinner with some of his friends. “What the hell,” I thought, “at times like this, one bore is as good a distraction as another.” So, professionally late, off I went, at eight in the evening, to Van's house. The other guests were already there when I arrived, and quickly enough we were seated around Van's table. His chick, Hendricke, served and later sat with us. She said little. The room was dark, the only light was one of those hooded warehouse lights, rather dirty and hanging from the ceiling on a frayed cord. It was just above the table; the food was brightly lit, as were the worn places and the spots on the cloth. But the faces of the guests were shadowed. Van introduced me to Sam, Frank, Nick, Ted and a couple of nondescript people about my own age. Being quite uninterested in this worn and dreary crowd, I began immediately to tell them about my twenty wasted years and the rage and self-pity about those years which had been building in me all day.

But Ted interrupted: “I lived in the capital; I was young and strove to make my mark. I was the first to seize a powerful subject from the news of the day. I painted a great raft, and it was shown in a big show. Few people cared for it, and so I was disappointed and left the capital. A few years later, I died, and a few years after that, a movement began that lasted almost half a century. I was the prophet of the movement, and I got nothing—but I have the memory of that raft where men ate each other and a black man lifted a banner for freedom.”

Sam, sitting on my right, said quietly, “When my mother died, I took my inheritance from her and moved to the country with my father and my old nurse. For ten years I painted visions in a valley of vision. Then my money ran out, and I needed a woman to love. I returned to the city, married, and afterward lived for thirty years and more in a straitjacket of Victorian gentility. During all that time I tried to support my family by teaching young ladies the accomplishment of watercolor painting. When I died, my son burned every piece of mine that he could find from that first ten years in order to preserve my tiny, genteel Victorian reputation from accusations that I was crazy. About half a century later, there was a little vogue for the few things he missed. The vogue has faded now, but I have never forgotten that valley in the moonlight.

“Yeah, Fred,” Frank butted in from the other side of the table, “quit your bellyachin’. We’ve all got hard stories to tell. I was top painter in the country. I slept with the richest and most beautiful women, until I got sick and deaf. Then war tore everything to pieces, and when it was over, I had been on the wrong side. I went into retirement and passed the time etching memories of the war and painting murals in my dining room. I painted my fellow countrymen as I knew them to be; and, because it was a dining room, I painted Saturn, eating. All I got in the end was exile. But I always knew, Saturn eats.”

Then Nick remarked, ‘Ah, yes. Top painter. I was that. Called to the capital to make designs for invitations to parties and to paint a ceiling several blocks long. The whole thing disgusted me and I left. The truth is, I could be the top, or I could be free. I chose freedom.’”

Van spoke last. “I was young and struggled; then I was rich and famous; then I was poor and old. Between the time I was rich and the time I was poor, I squandered away my money while art styles changed but mine did not, I painted my portrait old, laughing, with my hand on a death’s head in the dark. And then I painted my portrait a year older, not laughing—wan, wobbly, waiting to die.. But, damn! I loved every minute at the easel, from the first time when I was a kid on the make to the last time when I was a pauper who had been forgotten.”

Then Van said, “And we’ve all invited you here, Fred, to say that in life as in art, it’s not the product but the process that’s important. The fame and fortune of a life don’t matter; it’s the beauty of the myriad moments of living that counts. Bandwagons come and bandwagons go, but art is the process of making a life, and that goes on forever.”